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In the Plastic Wilds What Animal Is Real?

Largo, Md. This crossroads community in Prince Georges county, just outside the Capital Beltway, has been afflicted with more than rampant development and the indoor arena where Washington's basketball Bullets do their thing. It also has the Wildlife Preserve.

The American Broadcasting Company, which owns the preserve, has been flacking the place so hard on Baltimore television that I thought I would go and see if it was as bad as I expected. It is, pretty much. Here is a report.

Driving into the preserve, after being waved toward the parking lot by a small black youth decked out in a Sambo outfit and lacking only a slice of watermelon to pass for a minstrel show escaper, the visitor hears far-off jungle sounds. But upon advancing closer, toward the ticket window where a \$4.25 admission charge is extracted, one realizes that they are recorded—old sound tracks, perhaps, from a Tarzan adventure or maybe "The African Queen."

That is the beginning. One passes through the gates into a world of expensive schlock, a combination of Disneyland

and a Trader Vic restaurant. ABC, of course, is the purveyor of Howard Cosell, and like Howard, the Preserve is essentially tasteless. There are countless expensive touches—a lot of money has been spent on planting, and there are sickly geraniums and petunias on every hand. But basically it is a shopping center.

I avoided the Chicken Hut, Snack Shack, Pizza Pavilion, Village Bazaar and Artisans' Village, considered but rejected the Kuddle Korner where a number of small animals are maintained for public fondling, and boarded the Kangaroo Kaboose for a tour of the preserve.

"My name is John and I'll be your wilderness guide," said the driver, John, our wilderness guide. He was driving a train of four air-conditioned, 30-seat coupled-together buses. His only passengers—this may be an encouraging sign—were two middle-aged women from down the road and me.

Our tour took us on a loop of about 2 miles from one hot, over-grazed piece of Prince Georges county pastureland to another. In one wire-fenced section, buffalo and elk fought the flies and stamped in the



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dust. In another, black bears were lying around looking uncomfortable beside a dirty pool. There was little shade, but someone had planted some tiny saplings. The bears, however, had broken them down. John gave a bear a piece of apple.

From the bears we went through a gate into what John said was the South American Preserve. Llamas, from the high cold country of the Andes, stood around on mounds of dirt or under some recently transplanted palm trees—to provide a South American atmosphere, presumably, although there are no palm trees in the Andes.

We passed through Australia, where John told us that a kangaroo is a marsupial, and then through a gate where he announced that "we are now going to enter the most dangerous and treacherous of all continents: Africa."

In Africa we saw young elephants playing in a pond, a lioness in a "cave" made from a large piece of the sort of concrete pipe used normally for sewers, and other live-

stock. The Kangaroo Kaboose ended its journey after passing a pen of tethered hawks and owls.

It isn't as awful as I have made it sound, perhaps, though it is hard to find a good word to say about anything so overwhelmingly corporate and artificial. The animals appeared healthy enough, for the most part, and at least are not confined to cages.

But why do we have this repulsive national drive to cash in on decent human instincts? People want to climb mountains, so promoters build toll roads to the top. Families like beaches, so wetlands are filled and Ocean Cities built. Many of us have a curiosity about wild animals, so ABC gives us a Wildlife Preserve complete with Africanesque Muzak. Give a corporation free rein and the glimmer of profit in the distance, and it will plasticize the world.

The Wildlife Preserve is being pitched as a place to take children. They may enjoy it, if they go, but they will learn more about wildlife watching pigeons in the park.